One Real Man

Chapter One

Judd Conner had always been a real man. His father had taught him to be hard but fair. He had given him his love of family and faith in God. Judd had been raised by his father as his mother had died early on in Judd's life. He had an older brother and sister but they had long since moved on with their lives. He missed his father every day.

The world had changed since those close family times. The collapse of the monetary system had changed the course of man and Judd was riding the flow like everyone else. He was returning from a foraging trip for food and the all too precious water that was required to sustain life. A half a day's walk from here his family waited upon his return. As he made his way quietly through the woods his thoughts jumped around from his father to the faces of his children and wife. The large rattan staff at his side helped keep his walking pace and provided protection when needed. He loved rattan, easy to care for. Flexible when needed and he had made one other small addition to his staff. He had made two large brass ferrule's to cap each end of the staff. It had taken him a while to get used to it but talk about striking power!

He had one more ridge to climb, about 1500 feet up and down the other side was home. He noticed a small black curl of smoke just above the ridge. He had told his wife before about burning green wood or anything other than deadwood in the winter. Makes too much smoke. As he crested the ridge and looked down into his little valley what he saw stunned him. He stood for several minutes looking around, his eyes did not blink. His breath did not draw nor did his heart beat. As he reached the split rail fence that marked his yard he realized he did not know how he got there. The house was gone, charred and ash laden heaps of black lay where the house used to be.

The staff fell away from his hand as he sank to his knees. As his knees touched the ground an exasperated scream emitted from his throat as the snot and spittle flew forth from his mouth and nose. The tears that ran down his face felt as if they were burning his cheeks as his face hit the dirty snow in front of what was left of the house.

He screamed and cried and banged the ground until red surrounded his fist. As he lay there he almost felt as if life were draining away from him, and in a way it was. He pulled himself up from the prone position to his knees and looked to the sky. He prayed for what a man should never prey for. He prayed for a good moment or even a second but what he prayed for more than anything else was revenge.

He grasped his staff and stood and walked towards the smoking pile of rubble. He looked at what was left and saw no reason to disturb this now. He walked around the house and found several sets of tracks leading in and out of the clearing. It appeared to be three people. From the foot prints he assumed they were all men. He looked back over his shoulder and as he turned away his resolve now steeled and his heart consumed with hatred as he walked away.

He headed out to collect several small stores of supplies in the area. The trail of his prey was fresh and had to be followed as soon as possible. He made it to his first cache. He had stashed this one in the side of a hill in a small dry cave. It contained the only firearm he owned. It had been given to him as a child by his father. He had treasured the old bolt action Remington Model 511 Scoremaster in 22 LR. It was safely wrapped and protected and he had about 300 rounds of ammo for it. His set of hunting knives as well as an old Bear and Sons Damascus Bowie were here. He checked the skinner and filet knives as well as the Bowie to make sure they all had a good edge. A small cleaning kit for the rifle and stones for the knives were added to his pack. He hung the rifle on his shoulder after he had slung the pack and headed down the trail to the next small cache. It would only take half a day to clean out all of the stores in all the caches. Then he would be on his way.

Chapter Two

Judd had been on their trail for three days now. He had followed them around in a circle and back down the mountain headed toward the flatland. As he rounded a corner on the trail he stopped. The hair on his arms and the back of his neck stood up and he got that funny feeling in the pit of his stomach. He backed just off the trail behind a rock where he crouched and waited. Thank the heavens the wind was in his face. Around the corner came a small brown bear. His nose to the air the 300 pound bear would grow to be a large grizzly someday. The bear stopped in its tracks and lifted its nose again to the wind. He pawed the ground and mulled around the area for a few minutes. He had looked in Judd’s direction several times but Judd felt certain he had not been seen. The bear stood a moment and dropped and took off up a slight grade and disappeared into the tree line. Judd sat down with his back against the rock and took his lunch there. He was going to give the youngster plenty of time to clear the area. After all, this was his territory and not Judd’s.

As he sat and ate his mind drifted to thoughts of his wife and two children. How he missed them. He at least could still clearly see their faces and hear their voices in his mind. He smiled and cried all at the same time. He had a small cloth in his shirt pocket that his wife had stitched all their names on and they had all slept with it as well. Judd always carried this with him on his foraging trips as a sweet reminder of home. He had done likewise with a small piece of material that was left with the family. No doubt his piece of cloth was all but dust in the wind. He pulled the small swatch of cloth from his pocket and held it to his nose. He still smelled that soft wonderful smell of Rachael his wife and the child like smells from Tommy and Anna as well. He knew that all too soon he would no longer have this small indulgence of peace and security and that his enemy would have taken all that he had. He sniffed the cloth one more time and stuck it back into his pocket.

Lunch and his small reverie done, he slowly started back down the trail keeping a watchful eye for the bear as he made headway. He had walked about another mile or so down the trail when he caught the small piece of mono filament line with his ankle in mid stride. He did not see it in time but did hear the large tree limb headed in his direction. He almost made it out of the way but just as he hit the ground a large spike embedded in the limb caught the back of his pack. When the spike

entered the pack it did not do much damage other than the hole it ripped in the pack. What it did do was slide Judd across the ground with its forward momentum and across a small rock. When the limb had completed its arch and had reached the end of its rotation it recoiled and pulled its way out of Judd's pack but not before it drug him across the rock again.

Standing to take a look at what damage had been done he noticed a small blood spot had started to grow on his shirt. Just as he was about to open his shirt to look at the wound a shrill laugh rolled down the side of the ridge across from him. It made his blood run cold and a shiver run down his spine. The evil laugh told him two things. He was on the right trail and must have been pissing his enemy off and that as he had believed before. Not all of them were men.

Chapter Three

Judd ducked behind cover and skirted the area slowly and quietly. He knew the direction the laugh came from and would pursue that shortly. When he got to what he thought was a safe area he stopped and dressed the wound on his stomach. Not too bad, a good cleaning about six stiches and a bandage. He decided to make camp. Due to the blood loss and he needed to think on his situation for a while. Would he be able to bring justice to a woman? Could he kill her? Too many questions. A small dinner and some medicine and he sacked out for the night. The next morning he got up and ate and worked the stiffness out of his joints and cleaned and bandaged the wound again. As he broke camp he started seeing things that made him grow cold. Someone had been in his camp last night. A small someone, the girl with the laugh he suspected. He carefully noted the prints and locked them into his memory. You can run hell spawn but you cannot nor will you ever hide. I will bring you justice.

Judd tracked his prey for several more weeks. He had avoided several traps and snares as well as a couple of false trails that had been set up for him. As he tracked his prey and evil grew within him. At times it seemed to almost burgeon in him to the point of exploding his physical body. Contempt was his companion; he was a harbinger of death and prayed often to complete his task. Since he had left his house and family he had not prayed once for salvation nor comfort as he expected none.

Judd stumbled along the trail. He was still on their trail but was almost out of food and the long days and nights of tracking and looking over his shoulder was taking its toll. He needed a real meal and to resupply his pack as well as a good night's rest on something other than a rock. This part of what used to be Colorado had not been known for its soft ground and easy travel but was a place to make or break a hard man much less a tenderfoot. Judd had reached his limit when he fell over a ridge line and saw a small town below in the valley. He pulled the cloth from his pocket and stuck it to his nose and drew what little smell it contained and used it to carry him down the ridge and into the unknown little village.

Chapter Four

Judd trudged past an old sign that said Lake City Colorado. As he painfully worked his way down the main street he came to what must have been a Lodge at one time. Above the lintel of the large doors hung a sign that said "O'Hagan's".

As he started towards the doors a large man at the door stopped him. "Rack your rifle in the foyer; you can keep your knives. We got good food and cold beer. You got money?" Judd just shook his head. "My name is Amos son. I am the Sheriff in this small village. You gotta a name?" Judd looked back at the man and smiled as he fell to the porch.

When he woke up he was warm and laying on an old couch. It sure was better than the dirt and rocks he had slept on for the last several weeks. The old man Amos was sitting next to him in a rocking chair drinking a beer. "Dang son thought we had lost you there for a while. You ain't nothing but skin and bones. How long you been out there?" Judd shook his head and sat up on the edge of the couch. "Far longer than I should have been. Amos is it?"

"Yeah that's me, now let's go and get you something to eat and drink. We can talk about getting you some supplies after that." Judd stood and followed Amos out of the small room off the great room in the center of the lodge. He was seated at a table and an older woman came over to tell him what was available to eat. After that conversation was out of the way he sat sipping on a tall glass of water as he looked around the room.

From his table he noted that there were not a great amount of people in the room, maybe ten or twelve. The place felt comfortable and easy going. He was turned around in his chair when he heard the thunk of a bowl hit his table. He turned around to see the old woman walking away. There was a large bowl of Elk stew with large chuck of homemade bread slathered with butter and a tall ice cold glass of beer. He grabbed the spoon and got busy on the best meal he may have ever had. When he was done and sitting there drinking the last of the beer he stood and walked around the room to admire all of the hunting trophies hanging there. He liked looking at all of the other oddball stuff hanging on the wall for decoration.

He sat at the bar and drank another beer and enjoyed another fresh piece of hot bread and talked to a few of the locals. Amos came over and they negotiated a deal for all of the supplies he would need for a while. He waited on the supplies to be brought and set up with the Inn keeper for a room for the night and a hot bath. He would wash his clothes in the old bath water and hang them to dry while he slept. He was comfortable and content for the first time in several weeks.

Chapter Five

Judd was walking around the room again as he waited on his supplies. He wandered towards a small room off to the left of the bar. He saw only a couple of tables in this area and as he started to turn and walk away he heard a noise. It came from the

right on the wall next to the bar where he could not see. As he walked around the corner he froze in horror. He stood and he looked, mouth hanging open, tears from his eyes. Rachael sat in the corner of the room behind the table looking at him. As he stood there the woman spoke. “Cat got your tongue Judd, miss your children Judd. WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT YOU MORON?” Judd noticed movement behind him in the main lodge. “You were supposed to go out with me that night instead of Rachael; I would have trained you right.”

Judd slowly walked up to the table and sat down. As he did he used his knee to push the table into the corner pinning the woman in the chair. “Who are you?” Judd exclaimed. ‘My name is Catharine, I am Rachael’s sister.”

“Was” Judd said? “Was what?” Catharine said as she cocked her head. Judd looked at her as a large smile came across his face. “You were her sister, you killed her. SHE IS DEAD, so no longer your sister nor my wife.”

Catharine laughed long and hard. The same eerie laugh he had heard on the ridge that afternoon. “I looked for you and Rachael for years after the collapse. I wanted what was mine. I am sorry about the children, but you should have had my babies not hers. When I finally found her you were not there and I figured that this would be the ultimate justice. If I can’t have you then neither can she.” Judd looked towards the sky and whispered to himself “Please forgive me God.”

Judd stood and drew the Bowie from the chest rig he wore it in and leaned across the table. He grabbed a handful of Catharine’s hair and pulled her forward as he placed the blade to her throat. She looked at him and grinned. “Do it you miserable piece of..." Judd slammed her face into the table hard. He stood and as he did he used the back of the knife to break the oil lamp in the sconce above her head. The oil poured down over her as she started to come to. He took the knife and struck what was left of the glass and the burning wick fell down onto her chest and she blazed up. As he slowly backed away from the table as the pitch of her scream stared to change and climb higher. He kicked the table over. The small bucket candle that had been sitting there flipped around in the air dumping its contents and increasing the blaze and heat of the fire. She no longer moved or made noise.

The next thing Judd knew he was being dragged out the front door and was pinned to the porch by four very large men. He was held there for a while until the fire was out. Amos walked up looking grim and squatted down next to Judd. “Let him go boys.” Judd sat up leaning against a post and took a deep breath. “Son, you better have a good reason for killing that woman. She had been arrested for theft, we do not have a jail and we were keeping her here till the Judge comes through. Easier to feed and clean her. She was tied to the wall behind the chair she sat in and had no way to defend herself or get away from the fire.” Judd looked at Amos and smiled. “Amos, let’s go back inside. I have quite a story to tell you.”

Epilogue:

Judd finished hanging the door in the new cabin. He looked out across the clearing and smiled at the large flower garden that was in bloom where the old cabin used to be. He wondered to himself if he would ever figure women out or for that fact human nature in general. He worked hard and prayed for guidance and talked to his father a lot…

The End